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ABSTRACT

A study examined two factors thought to affect an individual's preference for confrontation or avoidance strategies when ending a relationship--communicator age and sex role orientation. Subjects were 29 fifth grade students, 64 high school sophomores, 43 college students, and 37 adults enrolled in a night class. All subjects read a scenario from the Friendship Survey entitled "Letting Someone Know That the Friendship Is Over" and responded to a series of questions that elicited (1) a list of all possible strategies that could be used to terminate a relationship, (2) the strategy most preferred by the respondent, and (3) the reason for that preference. All respondents, except the fifth grade students, also completed the Bem Sex Role Inventory. Both fifth grade students and adults displayed a preference for confrontation as opposed to avoidance relationship termination strategies, whereas adolescents preferred avoidance strategies. Androgynous persons preferred confrontation strategies, while masculine sex-typed persons displayed the greatest preference for avoidance strategies. (FL)

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Communicator Age and Sex Role Orientation Differences in Preferred Relationship Termination Strategies

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Communicator Age and Sex Role Orientation Differences in Preferred Relationship Termination Strategies

Clark and Delia (1979) argue that communicologists need to devote more research attention to communicators' message strategy selections. Although our rhetorical roots provide a strong foundation for such an undertaking, research in interpersonal communication is just beginning to re-discover the theoretical utility of topoi. To date, two research directions are evident in the study of message strategies: the developmental pattern of perspective-taking in persuasive strategies (Clark & Delia, 1976; Clark & Delia, 1977; O'Keefe & Delia, 1979; Delia, Kline, & Burleson, 1979) and situational differences in compliance-gaining tactics (Miller, Boster, Roloff, & Seibold, 1977; Roloff & Barnicott, 1976; Cody & McLaughlin, 1980). Most of this work has concentrated on instrumental rather than relational persuasive goals. However, attempts to define one's relationship with another constitute social influence endeavors which can usefully be studied from a communication strategies approach.

This study focuses on communicators' preferred strategies for relationship termination. Of all of the possible relationship definitions which a communicator may seek to accomplish, the breaking up of a relationship is probably among the most dreaded and painful. Although some may claim that none of their relationships have ever dissolved, the fact of the matter is that most of us have experienced the ending of a

number of relationships and no doubt will continue to do so. Strategies by which terminations are accomplished thus constitute a meaningful area for scholarly inquiry.

Although a number of relationships simply "fade away" over time without intentional strategic action by either party, quite a different situation faces the relationship in which one of the parties perceives that she or he is alone in desiring the relationship's demise. That person is experiencing negative consequences as a result of continuation of the relationship and thus is likely to be quite aware of his/her actions (Langer, 1978). Such awareness will likely produce intentional actions directed at alleviating the negative consequences, i.e., terminating the relationship. Thus, the unilateral desire to terminate a relationship probably constitutes a situation in which people do in fact implement intentional strategies, unlike other interaction situations in which behavior is executed without much conscious awareness.

Given that persons seeking a relationship termination probably engage in intentional strategic action, the question becomes one of determining what strategic choices are available and what factors affect the selection of given strategies.

In a series of investigations, Baxter (1979a,1979b,1979c, 1980) and Baxter and Philpott (1980a,1980b) have examined the communication strategies with which people terminate their interpersonal relationships. Repeatedly, this body of research has found that termination strategies vary along a Confrontation-Avoidance dimension. Davis (1973) has noted the same underlying

dimension in his theoretical work. Confrontation involves an explicit declaration to the other party that the relationship is over. Avoidance, on the other hand, is characterized by reduced interaction with the other person on the assumption that "actions speak louder than words."

Discovering communicators' predilections toward confrontation or avoidance can shed insight on the dynamics of the termination process. In particular, terminations which are initiated through avoidance action are more likely to be prolonged and frustrating than are terminations initiated through direct confrontation. Several arguments underlie our reasoning. In the first place, avoidarce action may be misunderstood by the other party, depending on the subtlety of the behavior and the social astuteness of the other. If the other party does fail to "get the hint," the terminator may be forced to employ more direct confrontation anyway in order to accomplish the termination, all at additional psychological costs. Further, confrontation as a last resort is likely to be more destructive than an initial confrontation would have been because the terminator is now additionally frustrated by the other's unresponsiveness to the hints. Even if the other party does understand the avoidance action and accepts its intended meaning, the terminator may experience pangs of guilt or lowered self-esteem in not having the courage or courtesy to face the situation directly; the reciprocity norm (Knapp, 1978) may be operating to establish the expectation that one rightfully "owes" the other party the courtesy of direct explanation. If the other does understand the intended meaning of the avoidance, however, his or her reaction is more likely to be anger and hurt rather

than passive acceptance, which in turn may lead to subsequent confrontation and/or retaliation. Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1976) suggest that persons do not wish to perceive themselves as the "broken-up-with" party. To accept the other's avoidance action as a declaration of termination is essentially to admit that the initiative for breaking up rested with the other and not with Self. When the other party feels ignored or gilted, motivation may exist for that party to force a confrontation, thereby prolonging the termination anxiety. At least with an initial direct confrontation, the other party has the opportunity to present his or her side of the matter.

Although an initial confrontation with the other may not be particularly pleasant, it does have the advantage of relative swiftness. Avoidance action will probably end in confrontation, as well, but only after the prolonged anxiety of witnessing the failure of the initial termination effort. Further, delayed confrontation is more likely to be destructive for the parties than is initial confrontation; delayed confrontation compounds the reasons for termination with the additional frustration and anger over how the other party has reacted thus far in the termination effort. Even if the other party passively accepts the avoidance action, the terminator faces the lingering cost of knowing that he or she took the coward's way out of the relationship.

Some research supports our claim that confrontation and avoidance strategies differ in their likely outcomes. Baxter (1979a) reported that the failure to choose confrontation as an initial termination strategy was the most frequently mentioned regret by college students recounting their personal termination experiences.

In a Story Completion task in which participants traced the dissolution of a relationship, Baxter and Philpott (1980a) found that a termination attempted through avoidance as opposed to confrontation resulted in a prolonging of the ending ordeal with greater ultimate frustration and hurt for the relationship parties.

Although some research has examined characteristics of the relationship which relate to one's preference for confrontation or avoidance strategies (Baxter, 1979c, 1980; Baxter & Philpott, 1980a), little attention has been given to characteristics of the individual which might affect termination strategy selection. This study examines two factors thought to affect one's preference for confrontation or avoidance termination strategies--communicator age and sex role orientation. Specifically, we hypothesize that:

H_1: Preference for confrontation as a termination strategy will be most apparent among children and adults.

H_2: Preference for confrontation as a termination strategy will be most apparent among androgynous persons and least apparent among undifferentiated persons.

We predict that both children and adults will prefer confrontation over avoidance, but each will do so for quite different reasons. Pre-adolescent children will prefer confrontation because of their relative lack of social perspective-taking and their greater egocentrism (Clark & Delia, 1976; Clark & Delia, 1977; Delia, Kline, & Burleson, 1979). A person who selects avoidance over confrontation generally does so because he or she has analyzed the other party's

likely reaction to the termination and expects it to be negative; avoidance is perceived as a relatively painless way to declare the end of the relationship to the other party without suffering directly from his or her wrath. Because the child has more limited social perspective-taking abilities than an older person, he or she is less likely to select strategies based on the anticipated reaction of the other and thus is less motivated to select avoidance. Further, the child's more limited social perspective-taking abilities make it unlikely for him or her to realize the meaning which avoidance may have for the other. If a pre-adolescent child wishes to let the other party know that their relationship is over, we predict that the preferred strategy will be a direct confrontation to that effect.

Adults are also expected to prefer confrontation as opposed to avoidance. Because the adult has a broader relationship experience base than younger persons, he or she is most likely to realize the delayed and hidden costs afforded by an initial avoidance tactic. Both the adolescent and the adult are cognitively mature enough to anticipate the other's immediate reaction to the termination and his or her interpretation of the avoidance action, thus realizing the short-term cost/benefit advantage of avoidance over confrontation. However, because of the adult's broader experience base, he or she is more likely than the adolescent to undergo the immediate costs of a confrontation in lieu of the prolonged and frustrating ordeal which may accompany an avoidance strategy.

In contrast to the child and the adult, both of whom are expected to prefer confrontation over avoidance, the person in adolescence or late adolescence is expected to prefer avoidance as a termination strategy. The adolescent is in a transitional period, cognitively and experientially sophisticated enough to realize the immediate costs which may accompany a direct confrontation with the other party, but not yet sophisticated enough to take a broader perspective. As a consequence, the adolescent is likely to opt for avoidance because of its immediate ease, little realizing the protracted and frustrating ordeal which may ensue from that selection.

Sex role orientation is also expected to affect one's preferred termination strategy. Sex role orientation refers to the motivation of one's actions in given situations. Sex-typed persons are motivated to respond in ways consistent with stereotypical masculine or feminine sex role standards, regardless of the situational appropriateness of that compliance (Bem, 1974; Bem & Lenney, 1976). In contrast, androgynous persons are not constrained by a single sex role standard; they are motivated to respond with the situationally effective behavior regardless of its masculine or feminine stereotypical overtones (Bem, 1975; Bem, Martyna, & Watson, 1976). The undifferentiated person is a low self-esteem person who possesses a relatively inhibited response repertoire regardless of the situation (Bem, 1977).

Confrontation has stereotypical elements of both masculinity and femininity. To take the initiative and confront the other party with one's decision to terminate the relationship displays a variety of characteristics associated with masculinity: assertiveness, independence, capacity to reach decisions, willingness to take a stand (Bem, 1974). However, a decision to confront the other party manifests stereotypical feminine characteristics, as well: concern for the status of one's relationships, attentiveness to the relationship's progress and its problems, sensitivity to others' reactions, and eagerness to soothe hurt feelings (Bem, 1976).

Because of its mixed sex role cues, the confrontation strategy is less likely to be preferred by masculine sex-typed persons and feminine sex-typed persons than by androgynous persons. The androgynous person feels equally comfortable with both masculine and feminine traits, in contrast to sex-typed persons who avoid cross-sex behavior (Bem & Lenney, 1976; Bem, Martyna, & Watson, 1976).

Whereas the masculine sex-typed person and the feminine sex-typed person have at least partial sex role consistency in the confrontation strategy, the undifferentiated person feels relatively inhibited with both masculine and feminine behaviors. Thus, it is anticipated that the undifferentiated person will display the least preference for confrontation as a termination strategy.

METHODS

Respondents

Useable protocols for this study totaled 173, distributed as follows: 29 protocols were obtained from fifth grade pupils at a local public elementary school; 64 protocols were obtained from students attending required sophomore English classes at a local public high school; 43 protocols were gathered from a random sampling of upperclassmen dormitories at a local college; and 37 protocols were gathered from adults attending night classes at the same college institution.

Procedures

All respondents received The Friendship Survey which contained two scenarios presented in counter-balanced order across the entire sample: the "Making Friends" scenario and the "Letting Someone Know that the Friendship is Over" scenario. Only the latter scenario relates to the current study. It read:

> Sometimes we decide that a person we used to like is no longer our friend. Imagine that you no longer wish to continue the friendship you have had all year long with a boy/girl from your school (college and adult respondents received the following phrase in lieu of the underscored portion above: "person from your school or work whose sex is the same as yours").

Following the scenario, respondents were asked a series of free-response questions which solicited the following data:

1. a self-generated list of all possible strategies by which the termination could be brought about;
2. the preferred strategy from among those generated in #1;
3. the reason for the preference selection.

All respondents except the fifth graders also filled out the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI).[1]

Scoring

The BSRI was scored according to Bem's median split procedures (Bem, 1977). The median masculinity score for the sample of high school, college, and adult sub-groups was 5.05 and the median femininity score was 5.15, producing 36 completed protocols from each sex role orientation category. The breakdown of sex role orientation categories within each of the three age groups revealed no significant differences (χ^2 = 5.04, 6 df).

The free-response protocols were independently assessed by two coders. Reliability between coders on the preferred termination strategies was .87.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of preferences for confrontation and avoidance strategies as a function of respondent age group. The asymmetric lambda test applied to the

[Insert Table 1 here]

tabled data produced a .15 reduction of error in predicting preferred termination strategy with knowledge of communicator age. The chi square test produced significance at the .08 level (χ^2 = 6.63, 3 df). However, the direction of the differences is consistent with the hypothesis advanced above; pre-adolescent children and adults displayed proportionately greater preference for confrontation than did adolescents and late adolescents.

Preferences for confrontation and avoidance strategies as a function of sex role orientation are summarized in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 here]

The asymmetric lambda test produced a .21 error reduction in predicting preference from knowledge of sex role orientation category. The chi square test revealed significant differences in the tabled data at the .01 level ($\chi^2 = 14.43$, 3 df). As hypothesized, the androgynous persons displayed proportionately the greatest preference for confrontation. However, contrary to expectation, the undifferentiated group did not display the least preference for confrontation.

DISCUSSION

Although the overall relationship between age and strategy preference was not supported at the .05 alpha level, the direction of the differences is consistent with the first hypothesis. Pre-adolescent children and adults displayed the greatest preference for termination through direct confrontation. Adolescents and late adolescents preferred avoidance as a termination tactic.

Unfortunately, the data do not permit confirmation of the underlying reasons advanced in support of the first hypothesis. Children and adults were expected to prefer confrontation but for opposite reasons; children were expected to prefer confrontation because they lacked cognitive and experiental sophistication and adults were expected to prefer confrontation because they possessed that very sophistication. Adults tended to provide more other-oriented reasons for their strategy preferences than did the children, but this constitutes informal evidence at best of greater cognitive sophistication on the part of the adults.

Much of our rationale for preference differences as a function of age was based on the claim that confrontation is a more effective termination strategy. A provocative alternative explanation is that each age group simply responded with the strategy most compatible with its view of the friendship relationship; any differences between age groups may thus reflect differing perceptions of the rights and responsibilities of friendship rather than different levels of awareness. Adolescents, for example, may opt for avoidance because their view of friendship is that it can be exited at any time without obligations to the other party. Similarly, adults may prefer confrontation not because they know it to be effective but because their view of friendship obligates an explanation to the other regardless of the reasons for dissolution. Certainly, additional research is needed to determine why preference differences emerge as a function of communicator age.

The results of this study highlight the importance of sampling research participants across the life span. To date, the bulk of the research in the termination process has been done with college-aged persons. Persons of differing ages do respond in vastly different ways to the termination process, and this factor needs to be taken into account in subsequent research. The mean ages of the youngest and the oldest age groups in this study were 10.0 years and 31.0 years, respectively. Clearly, there is a need to sample younger children and older adults in any subsequent work.

As hypothesized, androgynous persons displayed greater preference for confrontation than did the other sex role

orientation groups. This finding is consistent with the view of the androgynous person as situationally adaptable. Whereas the effectiveness of the masculine sex-typed person is confined to stereotypical masculine behaviors and the effectiveness of the feminine sex-typed person is limited to feminine tasks, the androgynous person is capable of adapting to either type of task or combinations thereof. Because confrontation incorporated both masculine and feminine behaviors, the androgynous person was more likely than a sex-typed person to prefer it as a termination strategy.

The masculine sex-typed person displayed the least preference for confrontation, contrary to the expectation that the undifferentiated person would least prefer confrontation. Although confrontation is consistent with some of the stereotypical masculine characteristics, it simultaneously displays stereotypical feminine traits, as well. In contrast, the avoidance strategy may allow the masculine sex-typed person to be entirely consistent with the masculine sex role standard. Avoidance could suggest a lack of concern for the other's reaction and the relationship, the ability to make up one's mind, the ability to take action independently from others, and dominance or leadership in the form of taking the initiative in separating. Thus, the masculine person has little reason to opt for confrontation; compliance with the masculine sex role can be met more consistently through avoidance.

In contrast, the feminine sex-typed person is not so fortunate in his or her strategy alternatives. Confrontation offers a mixed behavior, simultaneously containing feminine and

masculine stereotypical characteristics. However, unlike the situation for the masculine sex-typed person, the feminine sex-typed person finds little consolation in the avoidance strategy. One might argue that avoidance displays a non-assertive, non-forceful mode of action, but the reality of the situation is that avoidance in fact conveys a very forceful and assertive message to the other party. Faced with two alternatives both of which preclude compliance with the feminine sex role standard, it is not surprising that the feminine sex-typed group displays a relatively mixed preference. Avoidance may be slightly preferred over confrontation because its stereotypical masculine features are at least less overt than is the case with confrontation.

The undifferentiated person, like the feminine sex-typed person, faces two options neither of which allow behavior consistent with how he or she views Self. Thus the undifferentiated person has a preference pattern comparable to that of the feminine sex-typed group. Avoidance may be slightly preferred over confrontation because it at least frees one from behaving in the other's direct presence.

This study has initiated the exploration of individual difference factors which affect a communicator's strategy selection in accomplishing a relationship termination goal. Additional individual difference factors deserve research attention, as well. Further, this study was confined to same-sex friendship relationships; alternative types of relationships should be investigated. Unilateral termination is one of the least pleasant persuasive tasks we undertake. Part of the unpleasantness may be inherent in the very definition of

termination, but the unpleasantness of the termination process may be exacerbated by the manner in which we choose to implement the disengagement goal. Research which can shed insight into termination strategies is thus of potential benefit to us all.

NOTES

[1]The BSRI is not recommended for use with persons younger than adolescence (see Hyde and Phillis, 1979).

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TABLE 1

Frequency of Preferred Strategy Choices as a Function of Communicator Age

Age Group	Preferred Strategy		
	Confrontation	Avoidance	
Fifth grade	16 (55.3%)	13 (44.7)	29
High school	24 (39.3)	40 (60.7)	64
College	19 (48.9)	24 (51.1)	43
Adult	23 (64.1)	14 (35.9)	37
	82	91	

TABLE 2

Frequency of Preferred Strategy Choices as a Function of Sex Role Orientation

Sex Role Orientation	Preferred Strategy		
	Confrontation	Avoidance	
Androgynous	25 (69%)	11 (31%)	36
Masculine	9 (25%)	27 (75%)	36
Feminine	16 (44%)	20 (56%)	36
Undifferentiated	16 (44%)	20 (56%)	36
	66	78	